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Using portfolios to assess academic progress and academic self-concept

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Abstract

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Using Portfolios to Assess Academic Progress and Academic Self-concept

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One of the most positive trends occurring in large-scale assessment is the use of portfolio assessment. The purpose of this study was to determine if providing language arts students with the opportunity to be assessed by the portfolio method provides students with a greater understanding of their academic progress and to determine if a higher level of student self-efficacy exists when using the portfolio method instead of the traditional report card method of assessment. The control group, consisting of twenty-two sixth graders, received no opportunity to use the portfolio method of assessment in a language arts class. Instead they received the traditional report card. The experimental group, consisting of twenty-two sixth graders had the opportunity to use the portfolio system of assessment in their language arts class. After nine weeks, a questionnaire was presented to each group to investigate how students viewed their academic progress and to determine how students perceived themselves as learners. Within the limits of the survey methodology employed, it was concluded that the portfolio method of assessment had a significant effect on students' understanding of academic progress and particularly affected their perception of their ability in language arts class.

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Using Portfolios to Assess Academic Progress and Academic Self-concept

Over the last decade conversations about assessment have changed dramatically. A decade ago, discussions centered on standardized tests, and higher test scores were equated with improved student learning. The consequences of overemphasis on standardized test results became apparent by the end of the 1980s (Cannell, 1988; Shepard, 1990). As the 1990s began, alternative ways of assessing school accomplishments had become a primary topic of discussion for researchers, curriculum specialists, and psychologists.

Improving assessment is a difficult task facing those interested in educational reform. Educators are looking for assessment procedures to move assessment beyond the norm criterion-referenced tools and focus more on an evaluation of processes (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990).

The American education system is under intense scrutiny and pressure from virtually every political, educational, business, or interest group in our society. Since the publication

A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for School Reform was published in 1983, the challenge to produce students who can compete intellectually in the global society has been a focus and concern of those interested in the preservation of the American standard of living. There has been a call for educational restructuring. The public is demanding more and stronger evidence that such reforms are working to produce students who can think, communicate effectively, and solve complex problems. Educators have become increasingly aware of the limitations of standardized tests as the sole means of assessing student performance and evaluating significant educational change.

Literature Review

Assessment strategies that are beginning to gain momentum come in many forms and under many labels (Valencia, 1990). Some alternative ways of assessing students' academic progress are checklists, holistic scoring, "kidwatching", published books, performance presentations, portfolios, tests with authentic passages and higher-level questions.

These measures are often referred to as authentic assessment. They have been designed to

present a broader, more genuine picture of student learning. Authentic assessment is becoming the buzzword of hope among educators who value more expansive descriptions of learning (Zessoules, Wolf, & Gardner, 1988). Authentic assessment involves a complicated reevaluation of classroom activities and responsibilities. It changes the kinds of activities students engage in as well as altering the responsibilities of students and teachers. It transforms the static, mechanical moments when learning stops and testing begins into a continuum of moments that combine assessment, instruction, and learning. Assessment becomes an additional occasion for learning. It becomes a tool for students, parents, teachers, and administrators to discover strengths and future directions in students' work.

By capitalizing on the process of authentic assessment, students are actively involved in an ongoing, educational process. There is a shift in the students' roles and responsibilities. The student is challenged to become a judge of his/her own work. Questions are posed, judgments are made, and problems are reconsidered. Criticisms are integrated while new possibilities are

investigated. Students must come to recognize and build on the strengths of their work while also recognizing their weaknesses. Students are no longer the passive subjects of testing and evaluation. Students become accurate evaluators of their own efforts in the process of assessment.

If assessment is to be an integral part of an educational process rather than simply an evaluation instrument, then it must be seen and used as an opportunity to develop complex understandings. Students must learn important lessons about taking responsibility for their work, about a way of thinking and presenting their own ideas, about what it takes to pursue a project over time, and what it takes to get better. Students abilities to confront these kinds of real-world challenges -- to understand their work in relation to others, to build on their own strengths, to see new challenges in their own work -- all depend on their capacity to step back from their work and consider it carefully (Baskwill & Whitman, 1990).

The conceptual basis behind all these strategies is that we should hold students accountable for those achievements we have

designated as essential and important.We should test those outcomes in contexts that preserve the integrity of the task.

Numerous commissions, study groups, and forums have been created to deal with the educational problem of a need for greater authenticity in the way we assess student learning and growth. The National Commission on Testing and Public Policy (NCTPP) concluded a three year study of trends, practices, and impacts in the use of standardized testing instruments and other forms of assessment in schools (Wiggins,1990). The commission identified various limitations of testing to be addressed: (a) Tests are not perfect and, therefore, may be misleading as measures of individual performance. (b) Some test uses result in unfair treatment of individuals and groups. (c) Students are subjected to too much testing in the nation's schools. (d) Some testing practices undermine important social policies intended to develop or utilize human talent. (e) Tests have become instruments of public policy without sufficient public accountability. The frustration of educators with the limitations of conventional testing is well articulated in recent literature

on evaluation. There is a need for increased relevancy and authenticity in educational assessment tools and techniques.

Authentic Assessment

In recent years, numerous authors have called for greater authenticity in educational assessments (Archibald & Newmann, 1988; Cannell, 1989; Shepard,1989; and Wiggins, 1989,1990). These authors have called for the development and use of assessment techniques that are "more authentic". The assessments used should have conditions a student would experience in applying knowledge or skill in a real-world environment. Authentic assessments, as defined by Archibald and Newman (1988) must meet three criteria: (a) production of discourses, things, or performances, (b) flexible use of time, and (c) collaboration. These criteria are based on the concept of disciplined inquiry in the real-world environment, outside of the classroom.

An authentic evaluation of educational achievement directly measures actual performance in the subject area. Standardized tests measure test-taking skills directly and everything else either indirectly or not at all (Fairtest,

undated). Authentic assessments require students to demonstrate what they know and can do rather than to select a "correct" answer from a list of alternatives.

Recently, numerous organizations have recognized the need for authentic assessment tools, including the National Education Association (NEA), The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (Fairtest), The National Urban Alliance (NUA), and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Test publishers have responded by offering commercial packages incorporating features of authentic assessment. The recognition of multiple forms of intelligence (Gardner, 1983) has resulted in efforts to provide students with opportunities to exercise strengths in the mastery of instructional material presented. Performance based assessments have followed this approach to learning.

In 1990, Dr. Walter Hathaway, Director of Research, Evaluation, and Testing for the Portland Public Schools, conducted a broad based survey of the state of the art in authentic assessment. In conclusion, it was found that the state of the art in authentic assessment could best be

characterized as "developmental". This study failed to reveal widespread implementation of authentic assessment in the United States. Canada is ahead of the United States in large scale implementation of authentic assessment techniques. In the United States the greatest proportion of activity is found in the local districts. Greater effort should be directed toward monitoring the development of authentic assessment and in sharing information about existing models and techniques to facilitate implementation.

In America, educational reform and testing are intimately linked. At the same time, the rhetoric surrounding the introduction and interpretation of assessment programs often suggests that tests are not meant to influence curriculum and teaching directly (Resnick & Resnick, 1989). Alternative performance assessments for a thinking-oriented curriculum include open-ended writing exams and portfolio assessments. They set positive standards for an educational system that strives to cultivate thinking. Tied to curriculum and designed to be taught, performance assessments can be essential tools for raising authentic educational

achievement. Authentic tests are not needlessly intrusive or contrived merely for the sake of obtaining a single score or grade. Instead, they are constructed to enable the student to use knowledge in sophisticated and effective ways. Authentic tests are complex, intellectual challenges, not fragmented tasks. Authentic tests assess student habits and repertories. They are representative challenges within a given discipline. They stress depth more than breadth (Wiggins, 1989). If widely adopted as part of the public accountability assessment system in education, performance assessments (including portfolio methods) could remove current pressures for teaching collections of facts and skills, and could also provide a stimulus for introducing more extended thinking and reasoning activities in the curriculum. The adoption of performance assessment methods would require educators to describe the kinds of thinking performances desired and the criteria of excellent performance much more precisely.

Educators generally agree that methods for assessing educational growth have not kept pace

with the changing curriculum. Alternative ways of assessment must be found (Quinta & McKenna, 1991).

Portfolio Assessment

Fortunately, a number of positive trends are occurring in large-scale assessment that could enhance the alignment between instruction and assessment. One of the most positive trends is the use of portfolio assessment (Wiggins,1989). Through portfolios teachers and other school professionals have hoped to locate the means to tie together more closely curriculum, instruction and assessment for all children (Gomez, Graue, & Bloch, 1991).

According to Leon and Pearl Paulson, (cited in Rief, 1991) a portfolio is a purposeful, integrated collection of student work showing student effort, progress or achievement in one or more areas. The collection is guided by performance standards and includes evidence of student self-reflection and participation in the setting, the focus, selecting contents and judging merit. A portfolio communicates what is learned and why it is important.

The concept of portfolio assessment has gained popularity in art, writing, and reading

classes, but has yet to span the entire curriculum. Science, math, and social studies teachers are just beginning to examine the possibility of using portfolios to collect, organize, reflect on, and display selected work samples.

Various reading and writing projects have used portfolios for several years (Graves, 1983). For over five years Harvard University has had a successful arts program that uses portfolios for instruction and evaluation (Mitchell, 1989). The National Assessment of Educational Progress has recently suggested using portfolios to assess students' writing and reading abilities. In addition, many colleges and universities are asking students to submit portfolios as part of their entrance requirements (Farr, 1990).

Assessment portfolios can assist teachers in monitoring and evaluating students' performance. From the information collected in a portfolio the teacher can diagnose the learner's strengths and weaknesses. The information is also useful in gaining an understanding of student achievement, knowledge, and attitudes. When individual learners become aware of their own learning and become

directly involved in assessing their progress, assessment becomes a form of personal development and instruction (Adams & Hamm, 1992).

Many arguments for portfolio assessments are known to educators. Portfolios allow assessors to examine a body, rather than a sample of students' work in order to judge the quality of that work. The concept of portfolio assessment allows assessors to decide how the portfolios will be constructed and what functions their evaluations of the portfolios will serve (Stock, 1991).

The thing portfolios do best is invite diversity. They give a perspective on student performance that is unique, pointing out that education is the product of many points of view. Portfolios provide information on how pieces are integrated, looking more at process than product. When properly used in the classroom, portfolios become invitations to evaluators encouraging them to think critically. It requires them to move beyond the imput-controlled world of standardized tests and to think about reliability, validity, scaling, and other measurement questions in new ways (Rief, 1991).

There are several characteristics of a well-developed portfolio assessment system (Valencia, 1990). Assessment capitalizes on the best each student has to offer, rather than criticizing. It is an ongoing part of instruction. Teachers learn what to teach and how to teach it (Teale, 1990). Assessment includes cognitive, affective, and social processes. There is active, collaborative reflection by both teacher and student. The portfolio assessment is authentic. Children are assessed while they are actually involved in learning. In using portfolio assessment, teachers establish record-keeping systems for anecdotal records, scales, and checklists. Keeping anecdotal records helps teachers look at the positive, at what children can do. The observational record-keeping helps teachers observe things that have gone unnoticed before. It is important to be selective so observation notes that are taken are useful in forming instruction and assessing progress.

Documentation of Portfolio Use

At Blackburn Elementary, a Pre-K to Grade 2 school in Manatee County Florida, assessment became an issue. The School Improvement Team made

portfolio assessment a schoolwide focus. It was expected that all teachers would develop portfolio systems for assessment, but the specific strategies for doing so were left up to individual teachers (Leonard & Hysmith, 1991). In order to determine the needs for further inservice work and to assess the progress of the school's movement toward portfolio assessment, teachers were interviewed. When asked what had been easy about the transition, teachers reported that the philosophy and theory fit their own. They knew more about the children they were teaching and were able to focus upon individual children more. The portfolio system eliminated the need for testing and retesting children. When asked what was difficult, the teachers reported that they understood why they were using portfolios, but that they had many questions about how to go about actually using them. The recording system was a challenge to figure out. They experienced difficulty sorting out what was important information to collect. It was difficult to monitor the recording system. Some teachers reported difficulty getting children involved in self-assessment. Other teachers reported their

main difficulty was finding time to gather all the data. Some teachers resented the extra work it took to do the skills record keeping. One teacher said, "It's not a transition: it's an addition to what I already do." Most teachers complained of excessive paperwork. It was interesting to note the degree to which teachers in this school implemented portfolio assessment varied in direct proportion to their degree of involvement with whole language philosophy and practice. Teachers who embraced the philosophy became very excited about the kinds of information they were gathering. Teachers who did not embrace the philosophy became disillusioned about what they perceived as additional work requirements (Leonard & Hysmith, 1991).

Despite differences in their views about portfolios, most Blackburn teachers reported changes in the way they taught based upon how they viewed the children in their classrooms. The teachers reported they had become more reflective about how and what they were teaching.

Portfolio assessment incorporates several different strategies for gathering information. It is important to be sure that our assessment is

authentic and trustworthy and that it communicates clearly to other people (Teale, 1990).

Students, teachers, parents, and administrators need a clear understanding of what is valued in instruction, so they can have an equally clear idea of what assessment results mean. School districts have a responsibility to create assessment tasks that are meaningful and congruent with the tasks used for instruction (Winograd, Paris, & Bridge, 1991).

Communication Between Home and School

It is extremely important to help parents understand their children's progress. Parents want to know if their child is progressing and if that progress is consistent with the school's expectations for a child of that age (Lytle & Botel, 1988). Parents can and should play a significant role in the assessment process. Parents feel frustration when attempting to understand standardized test scores. What often happens is a misunderstanding between teachers and parents about the actual progress of the child. Parents' participation in the evaluation process can help to eliminate many misinterpretations (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990). Many opportunities

may be provided for parents to visit classrooms and observe the program in action. Two of the most useful parental assessment tools are an attitudinal scale and an observation guide. These two instruments can provide teachers and parents with a lot of relevant information through which joint decisions can be made concerning children's progress. An important bond is established between home and school.

In many instances teachers must rely on grades and communicate with parents through the use of a report card. Educators can take a number of useful steps. They can ensure that the format of the report card is congruent with the framework that underlies instruction. Evidence must be selected that fully reflects the goals of the curriculum. Also, grades on the report card should be accompanied by narrative accounts (Afflerbach & Johnson, 1991). Written formats communicate richer information than summary grades can convey. Through a narrative the teacher can provide insight into the child's individual strengths and weaknesses.

In a very real sense, students themselves are the most important audience for the assessment

data. Traditional methods and uses of assessment often leave students confused and disillusioned about their educational experiences. However, there are ways in which assessment data could be used to enhance students' involvement in their own learning.

Assuming active roles in the learning process and taking responsibility for what students are learning goes beyond recognizing that they have made a mistake. It involves imagining why, getting feedback from others, and finding practical ways to do something about it (Adams & Hamm, 1992).

Portfolios provide a powerful way to link learning with assessment. They provide opportunities for improved self-image and self-worth. They enhance self-esteem by having students take active roles in selecting and evaluating what they have learned.

Students' own attitudes are revealed through selections, journal entries, and organizational style. While paying attention to their own ideas and thinking processes, students are provided with a chance to look at what and how they are learning. As children express ideas and reveal

their thinking, teachers gain insights into how to design instruction to match student needs. Constructing a portfolio can contribute to helping schoolwork promote a student's confidence in his/her ability to perform tasks. Portfolios seem to be an ongoing conversation between student and student, student and teacher, and student and self.

Self-efficacy and Student Performance

Self-efficacy refers to a student's confidence in his in his or her own ability to perform tasks (Miller & RiCharde, 1991). Self-efficacy is of interest to instructors because it significantly influences students' performance. Research has identified an increase in perceived self-efficacy through the portfolio approach (Bandura, 1982). The portfolio method of instruction has a significant effect on students' perception of their ability to perform certain tasks. The portfolio method seems to involve and emphasize self-monitoring skills, and these skills are being brought to attention in portfolio classes. This method asks the students to employ their thinking skills more than other methods do. Since the portfolio method lends itself very well

to individualized instruction it may offer teachers an excellent opportunity to improve skills of all students.

The question remains whether the portfolio method will work in every classroom. It seems certain conditions must be present. First, students must be immersed in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Secondly, they need to be given time to do so in large blocks of time. Third, they must be given choices about what they are doing, And, fourth, they must receive positive response to their ideas. Once those conditions exist, teachers can introduce the concept of portfolios where students collect evidence of who they are (Rief, 1991). The hope remains that, despite some obstacles, performance-based assessments (including portfolio assessments) will support a richer, more open-ended curriculum and more accurately assess the skills of all students (Ascher, 1990).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if providing students with the opportunity to be assessed by the portfolio method of assessment provides students with a greater understanding of

their academic progress and to determine if a greater measure of self-efficacy exists when using the portfolio method. Based on a review of the literature, the following research hypothesis is stated: Students will extract greater meaning of their academic progress and have a greater measure of self-efficacy if the portfolio method of assessment is used in replacement of the traditional letter grade report card.

Method

Participants

Forty-four sixth grade language arts students served as participants in this study. The students were in two classes that were intact groups which had been matched as closely as possible at the beginning of the school year. The classes were matched according to gender, ethnic race, math scores (according to ITBS test scores), and reading scores on the DRP (Developmental Reading Program). They were also matched according to low, middle, and high socio-economic classes.

Design

The design of this study was Quasi-Experimental, after only, with two intact

groups having matched subjects. Group A, the control group, received the traditional method of academic progress reporting through a report card with letter grades. Group B, the experimental group, was given the opportunity to participate in using the portfolio assessment technique.

After receiving the report card, participants in group A completed a questionnaire. After a portfolio conference, participants in group B completed a questionnaire. Questions concerned their understanding of their academic progress in language arts class and their perception of themselves as learners.

Materials

The portfolio method of assessment was developed using anecdotal records, observation checklists, and student profiles to record information about students' academic progress and self-efficacy in a systematic manner. A questionnaire was constructed to find out if students extract meaning from report cards and to find out how students view themselves as learners.

Procedure

The study focused on using two different methods of reporting academic progress to

students. The study was designed to determine if, at the end of nine weeks, using the portfolio method made a difference in students' understanding of their academic progress in language arts class and to also determine if this method also increased the measure of self-efficacy in students.

Group A, the control group, consisted of twenty-two sixth grade students who received no opportunity to use the portfolio method of assessment in language arts class. They were assessed in the traditional method of using skills sheets, written exams, and other assignments to which points and letter grades were assigned. Report cards were sent home after nine weeks. Group B, the experimental group, consisted of twenty-two sixth grade students who had the opportunity to use the portfolio system of assessment in their language arts class.

The dependent measure for assessing differences in understanding of grade reports was a questionnaire which was given to all students in the control group, as well as to students in the experimental group. The questionnaire was devised to determine if the students viewed their academic

progress differently and also to find out if they perceived themselves differently as learners. For the purpose of scoring this instrument the following numbers were assigned to the letters: A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, and D = 1. An independent sample t test was the statistical test performed. Scores of students in both groups were recorded as raw scores and were compared for differences.

Results

Both how the experimental and control group participants understood their academic progress and how they viewed themselves as learners in language arts were of interest in this study. The study focused on using two different methods of reporting academic progress to students.

The control group received the traditional report card as an assessment method. The experimental group received the portfolio method of assessment.

Students' understanding of progress reports and their measure of self-confidence in language arts class was determined by answers to a questionnaire. After an independent samples t test was performed, scores of students in both

groups were recorded as raw scores and were compared for differences.

The data analysis confirmed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups, thus the research hypothesis was accepted.

A summary of the statistical data is reported on Tables one and two.

Table 1 Extracting Meaning from Progress Reports Following Two Methods of Language Arts Assessment

Method of Assessment	n	M	SD	t
Portfolio	22	21.3	2.07	
				11.9*
Report Card	22	11.6	3.23	

* p .0001 df = 42

Table 2 Measuring Self-confidence in Language Arts

Method of Assessment	n	M	SD	t
Portfolio	22	16.4	6.02	
				5.9*
Report Card	22	6.1	5.57	

*p .0001 df = 42

Discussion

Within this study, there is evidence that the portfolio method of assessment makes a significant difference in students' understanding of progress reports. There is also evidence that the portfolio method makes a significant difference in how students view themselves as learners in language arts class. .

The most important purpose of evaluation should be to help learning. This study provides useful information to support the use of portfolio assessment to help learning. When properly used in the classroom, portfolios become an invitation for students to think. They invite students to reflect on their learning and to become independent, self-directed learners. This study suggests that involving students by allowing them to participate directly in their learning and evaluation promotes understanding of their progress and self-respect.

Students have a better self-concept because portfolio assessment capitalizes on the best each student has to offer, rather than criticizing or finding errors (Valencia, 1990). The process of learning is as important to record as the outcome

of learning (Teale, 1990). Portfolio assessment is multidimensional, including cognitive, affective, and social processes. As students understand what it means to get better, they develop and strive for standards of excellence.

Formal assessments often attest to their "good" quality by relying on statistical data to support their trustworthiness or reliability. It is important that alternative assessment, such as portfolios, also address this issue. Portfolio assessment is not standardized, but must have standards. Without standards, there will be no way for teachers and students to interpret behavior or to evaluate performance. Trustworthy assessments will require clarity of standards. Confronting issues of expectations and standards is essential if alternative assessments are to be meaningful and useful (Valencia, 1990).

This study suggests that in the future students need to become actively involved in evaluating their own learning. Constructing portfolios can contribute in helping schoolwork promote an attitude of efficacy, wonder, and curiosity that stirs an appetite for lifelong learning. Students construct meaning as they

document and build their knowlege of themselves and their world (Adams and Hamm, 1992).

Within the limitations of the survey methodolgy employed and the literature examined, it may be concluded that the portfolio method of assessment has a significant effect on students' understanding of progress and perception of their ability in language arts class. This method seems to lend itself to individualized instruction and may offer teachers an excellent opportunity to help all of their students improve their language arts skills as well as their academic self-concepts.

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APPENDIX

A Questionnaire on Understanding Progress Reports

Scale: A = Agree a lot C = Disagree a little
B = Agree a little D = Disagree a lot

Extracting Meaning From My Progress Report	Circle one
1. I have a clear understanding of why I got my language arts grade.	A B C D
2. I was actively involved in the assigning of my language arts grade. (I know what scores were used to arrive at my grade.)	A B C D
3. I have a clear enough understanding of why I got my language arts grade so that I can explain it to my parents.	A B C D
4. I have a clear understanding of my strengths in language arts. (I know what I do best.)	A B C D
5. I have a clear understanding of my weaknesses in language arts. (I know the areas where I need to improve.)	A B C D
6. I know my language arts grade was based on what I learned.	A B C D

Measuring My Self-confidence In Language Arts	
1. I can use the writing process to fully develop many forms of writing: descriptive, narrative, expository.	A B C D
2. I can use higher order thinking skills when I write.	A B C D
3. I can use a variety of sources to make my writing interesting: dictionary, thesaurus, poetry, music, literature.	A B C D
4. I have improved my control of spelling and mechanics in my writing.	A B C D
5. I have improved the style of my writing and can clearly express myself.	A B C D
6. I enjoy sharing my writing with an audience.	A B C D